



What are true community-based organizations?
Helpful definitions and questions to ask as funders



About Firelight

Multi-donor fund.

Raises capital to support the agency and capacity of catalytic local community-based organizations.

Addressing significant gaps and opportunities for a range of vulnerable children and youth in Southern and Eastern Africa by supporting community-based organizations to engage and empower their own communities for systems change.

Builds evidence, leverages networks and supports local African institutions to influence critical stakeholders to value and fund local solutions that strengthen systems for children in Africa.

What are community-based organizations?

Indigenous nonprofit groups.

Arise from the local community and in direct response to the needs of the local community.

Work at a local level to improve life for residents.

Leverage existing community resources and outside investments.

Focus on improving the lives of community members over the short and long term.



Important considerations

Not all organizations that identify as community “based” organizations are actually serving the community. Many organizations can claim that they do “community-based” work or that they are “run by the community.”

But true community-based organizations are not

- INGOs staffed by locals
- NGOs founded by outsiders or expats
- National NGOs founded outside a community structure

Why does this matter?

Challenges to advancing children and youth welfare and rights....

Institutions and services often do not exist at the hyper-local level and in hard to reach geographies.

Distance limits the capacity of communities to access their own government.

Childhood development and family structures are inherently 'context-bound'.

Children and families do not live in silos.

Children's rights, welfare, early growth, care and learning are all realized or violated at the family and community level.

Community-based organizations

Are geographically well placed in remote, hard-to-reach, underserved areas.

Have familiarity with community and earned trust.

Intimately understand local needs and context (born of the community.)

Are well positioned to engage communities in their own long-term change.

Can be the link connecting networks (families, schools, government, public & private sectors, etc.)

Complement and strengthen reach of any existing services.

What should you consider when you are thinking about different organizations?



Entity

Type of registered entity (e.g. INGO, Local NGOs, CBO, unregistered)

(It is important to note that not all community-based organizations are CBOs – some call themselves NGOs)



Leadership

Situational identity of leader or leadership team (e.g. non-national, country national, local leader/community-led)

Born in the country? Born in the community? Raised in the community?



Origin and genesis of the organization

Where and how it began (this is connected to relationship with the community (e.g. non-national, country national, locally instigated, community instigated))

Where and how was it “born”?
Born of outsiders? Born from within community? Born of community collective action or outside-in power differential?



Organizational Power Structure

Where power is held, in practice

How are decisions made regarding problem/opportunity identification, program strategy, success, financial management, partnership development, etc.? (e.g. external board, national board, community)

How is organizational held accountable – and to whom?
How frequently?



A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a red smartphone and a green booklet. The person is wearing a vibrant, colorful patterned garment. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in similar colorful clothing, suggesting a community setting. The text is overlaid on a white circular shape on the left side of the image.

Approach to Change/Programming/Action

Who decides what the problem or opportunity is?

Who sets the parameters and priorities for change?

Who sets the direction and process for the program design, implementation, success indicators, impact etc.? (e.g. is this set by the Board alone or by the organizational staff or designed by the community itself?)

Actors in the change

Who does the work?

Does the action and agency lie with the community? Or with outside paid workers/staff?

Who gets the credit for the work?
The community or the organization or the leader?



Axis	External	National	Regional	Within Community
Entity	INGO	National NGO	Local NGO	CBO
Leadership	Non-national	National	Local leaders	Community leaders
Origin of Genesis	Outside the country	National center	Local center	Community born
Organizational Power Structure	External board or international HQ	National board and HQ in a national population center/capital city	Local board and HQ in local proximity	Community run and hyper proximate HQ
Approach to Change	Defined and decided in an international HQ according to international priorities	Defined and decided in a national HQ based on national priorities	Defined and decided in a local HQ based on local priorities	Defined and decided in a community HQ based on community priorities
Actors in the Change	Foreign staff do the work (perhaps subcontract to other entities)	National staff do the work (perhaps subcontract to other entities)	Local staff do the work	Community does the work

Questions to ask Organizations

- How is the organization valued by the community?
- Who does the organization say they are accountable to? Their board? Their donors? Their community?
- Where does the organization get its strategic direction and ongoing feedback from?
- Does the organization position it's own work as the value proposition for funding them or the community's work as the value proposition?
- Does the organization include a commitment to shared community empowerment in their mission or their programs/results/measurements of success?
- Does the organization have a track record of working in partnership with the communities they serve?
- What transparency activities/mechanisms does the organization already have with the community? Do they employ them in the normal course of business and without external funding?
- What is more important to the organization - continuing their programs/work or their growth? Or not being needed any more by the community? Or the community having the strength and assets to work on change themselves?

Things (for funders) to be careful of

Did you define the “problem”?

Did you decide “what to do about it”?

Don't confuse NGOs with CBOs (no matter what their registration status)

Don't confuse organizations that are community born and raised over organizations that were started by outsiders

Don't fail to fund community-born and raised organizations and believe that you are funding community-driven change

Don't let bigger grantees/INGOs/NGOs subcontract to CBOs and call it community-based or community-driven

Don't let NGOs or INGOs tell you what the problem is if they are not willing to bring a community member to the table with them

Don't let any organization pass off the work of the community as their own work